

Nehemiah chapter 4 - 9.30 am

May the words of my mouth and the thoughts of our hearts be acceptable to you O Lord our strength and our redeemer Amen.

Today I'm preaching on Nehemiah chapter 4 which is the third sermon in this series on Nehemiah.

Just a few words about Nehemiah before we look at our reading. The name Nehemiah means, "The Lord has compassion", and in ancient Israel parents gave this name to their sons to praise the Lord for his mercy in their lives.

Nehemiah was born in exile under the rule of the Persian empire and he was the third and last batch of Jews to return to Judah returning in 432 BC, and he returned as governor of Judah under the rule of the Persian Empire carrying with him the king's authorisation to rebuild the city wall around Jerusalem.

Throughout his early life in Jerusalem Nehemiah, devoted his energies to the rebuilding work, which was a very formable task especially with all the opposition he encountered with virtually every step he took.

The dominating characteristic of Nehemiah which shows through in these first 4 chapters is Nehemiah's resilience and dedicated determination to complete the job of rebuilding the wall and to complete it well.

Now the first three verses of our reading tell of the mocking sarcastic attitude of Sanballat, Nehemiah's chief opponent, and of Sanballat's friend Tobiah, who in chapter 2:19 said it was rebellion against the king of Persia, as Nehemiah started the rebuilding work.

However, the first reaction we read about of Sanballat and Tobiah to the work of rebuilding, is one of anger, we are told that Sanballat was, 'angry and greatly enraged', but why was that.

Sanballat was governor of Samaria under the rule of the Persian empire and Tobiah the Ammonite official was probably a high-ranking representative in Judah of the Persian empire, probably living in Jerusalem.

So both had power in or over Jerusalem at the time under the rule of the Persian empire, but they could both see the time, when the city wall was rebuilt that they would lose their power and sway over Jerusalem; also, being officials, they probably thought that they should have been the first to be consulted rather than being side lined by Nehemiah.

Sanballat the Samaritan, knew that he probably wouldn't be let in once the wall was built, and Tobiah wasn't a Jew, although he married a Jew, so he too would lose his power, because when the city wall was rebuilt the people would want Jews to be in charge of their city albeit under the rule of the Persian empire.

Now, as I've said, Sanballat was governor of Samaria. Now Samaria and Israel didn't get on, and the feeling was probably mutual, so any opportunity for an official of Samaria to poke fun or predict failure of a Jewish leader such as Nehemiah trying to rebuild the wall was grasped with both hands.

And Sanballat wasn't shy when he poked fun, he did it in front of his friends and in front of the Samaritan army, he called the Jews feeble and mocked them by saying will they sacrifice animals to God and ask God to perform a miracle so that the wall could be built in a day.

And he also mocked their skills to build, he said, "What are those feeble Jews doing; Will they make perfect stones out of burnt rubble? And Tobiah joined in, he said that the stone wall they are building, any fox going up on it will break it down.

What is interesting about all three remarks is the foolishness of them, because I'm sure that Nehemiah had no intention of asking God for a miracle, nor did he intend to build the wall with burnt rubble, nor did Tobiah believe that a fox could knock down a thick stone wall.

But in saying those foolish things both Sanballat and Tobiah were trying to convince Nehemiah, and all the people who were building, that to try and rebuild the wall was also foolish.

And of course continuous mocking and ridicule does have an effect, because discouragement is a strong weapon especially for people facing a huge task who are themselves not entirely sure of success, and Nehemiah was beginning to have doubts himself, so at verse 4 we hear that Nehemiah turned to God in prayer for help and encouragement.

And here is a lesson for all of us, because when things get tough and unmanageable, as they often do, then rather than just keep going until you drop or face certain defeat, turn to God for help and encouragement, and you will find new strength, and a more positive attitude to life and to the problems you face.

And a positive attitude is significant, because if you think you can't do something in all probability you won't be able to, but if you think you can, then in all probability you will succeed.

Nehemiah, who knew God, had a positive attitude, and with Christ as our Lord and saviour, we too should have a positive attitude to life.

But also in verses 4 and 5 we hear that Nehemiah wants God to punish them for their mocking, which while that may have been alright in a tooth for a tooth society like ancient Judah, it certainly is not for us as Christians.

Jesus continually said that we are to love our enemies, not pray for their destruction; the key to a fulfilling Christian life is reconciliation and forgiveness, not revenge.

So in verse 6 we are told that although the wall was only half as high as it was going to be, nevertheless there were no gaps, and it was now that Sanballat and Tobiah realised their mistake, because instead of just mocking the builders they should have been preventing them from rebuilding, because now attacking Jerusalem would be very much more difficult job.

Now their anger was rekindled because now they could see the end of their influence over Jerusalem more clearly, and it was only now that they decided to talk about launching an attack on the city verse 8, and in response Nehemiah prayed to God and set a guard on the city both day and night.

In verse 10 the Jews ran into a different problem, the strength of the burden bearers, that is, the builders and labourers, was failing through fatigue, and there was too much rubble about which was getting in the way of the rebuilding work. So now the work on the wall had to stop while the rubble was cleared away, and the builders had a rest.

In verse 11 the Jews realised that when the wall wasn't there they had a clear view and would know when anyone tried to attack, but now that the wall obscured their view, the enemy could get just the other side of the low wall without being seen.

So, all the builders had to also have their weapons of war handy, and they had to keep a sharp lookout, all of which probably slowed down the building work.

Nehemiah also stationed fighting men who were not builders where the walls were particularly low and where there were isolated places.

In verse 14 we're told that when Nehemiah had finished placing fighting men to cover the gaps he addressed the nobles and officials and the rest of the people and reminded them that the Lord who is a great and awesome God was with them, and he urged them to fight for their sons and daughters, their wives and their homes.

And I can understand why Nehemiah had to remind them, because so often when I'm up against a problem it is only as a last resort that I turn to God, and when I do I feel much better, it is then that I realise I should have turned to God sooner and saved myself all that worry and misery, we need to keep God at the forefront of our lives and not just think of him when we are in difficulty.

Now when all the preparations were in place and the rubble cleared away, the builders returned to the wall and started work again, and from that day half the work force were building and the other half were armed and on guard and all the population from the leaders down were united and supportive of the builders who were still armed in case of attack.

However, due to the huge length of the wall there were still gaps between the workmen along the wall and Nehemiah realised that these gaps were vulnerable to attack, so he posted trumpeters in the gaps and at the sound of the trumpet fighting men were to go to that place and defend it from attack, and again he reminded them that God was with them in the struggle.

Verses 15 to 18 has an air of triumph and optimism about it, the people were no longer afraid, they just got on with their work, there was a sense of enthusiasm and togetherness about.

Verse 16 for example reads, "From that day on, half of my servants worked on construction, and half held the spears, shields, bows, and body armour; and the leaders posted themselves behind the whole house of Judah."

And I'm sure that a good deal of enthusiasm was from the realisation that it was God who wanted the wall around Jerusalem to be rebuilt and as such they were doing God's work, and that all the opposition wasn't against them but against God, and their confidence and optimism came from the knowledge that no one prevails against God.

You see it was always God who wanted Jerusalem and the wall around it to be rebuilt, Nehemiah was merely his instrument to achieve his end. And the same applies today, God has always overseen his creation.

At the end of Matthew's gospel Jesus said, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me." God, through our Lord Jesus Christ, spelt out clearly in that sentence that he is in charge, and indeed always has been, and in the following sentences tells us to be his labourers.

Our work of course is not to build a wall around Jerusalem as he told Nehemiah, but to make disciples of all nations, and anyone who opposes that task is not attacking us but God, because it is God's work we are doing, and as Christians we are doing God's work at our places of work, in our homes and at our leisure time, and because of that we need to keep God at the forefront of our minds.

As we sit let us pray

You came, Lord Jesus, to teach us the way of life that you require, to show us how we are to serve you and our neighbours; make us receptive to your teaching and to your gospel, and help us to live a life of service to you, to the glory of your name.

Amen